

# CHICAGO BLACK RENAISSANCE LITERARY MOVEMENT

## LORRAINE HANSBERRY HOUSE

**6140 S. RHODES AVENUE**

**BUILT: 1909**

**ARCHITECT: ALBERT G. FERREE**

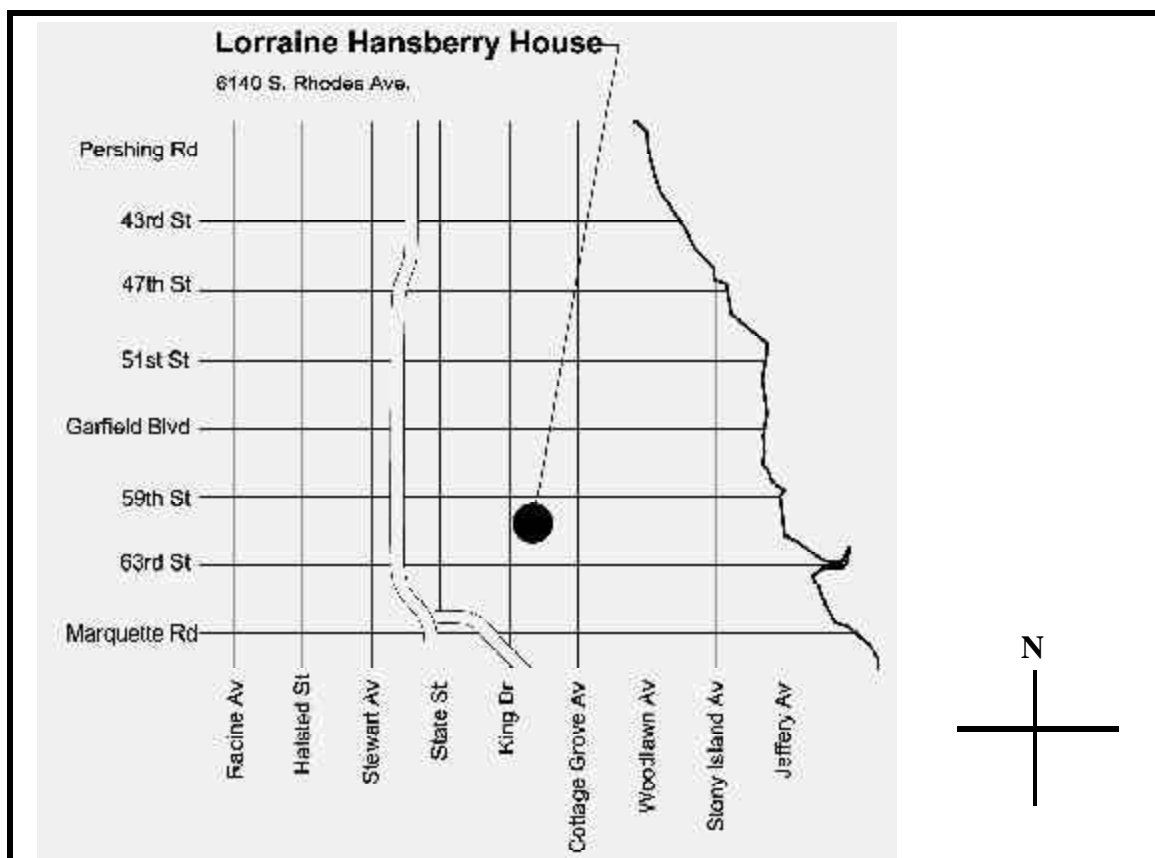
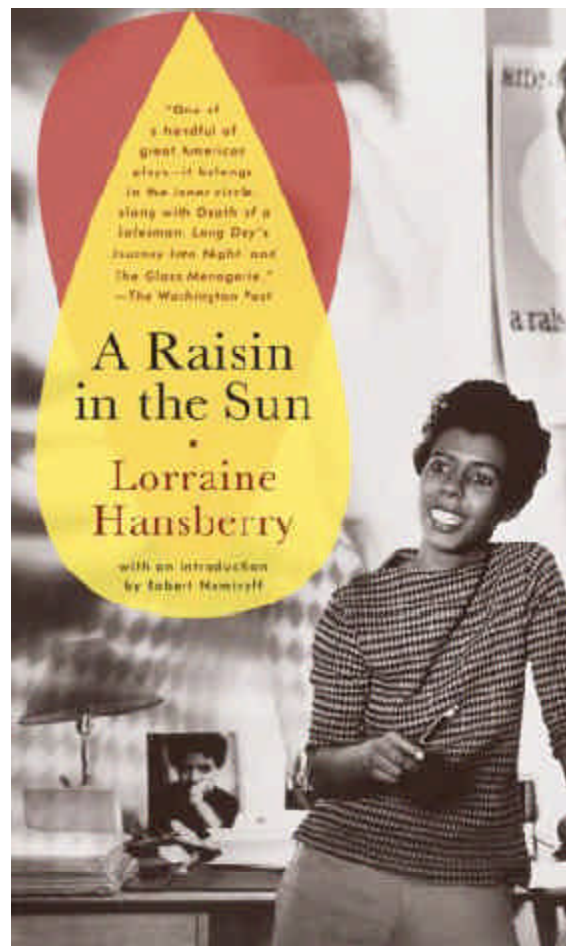
**PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: 1937-1940**

For its associations with the “Chicago Black Renaissance” literary movement and iconic 20<sup>th</sup> century African-American playwright Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965), the Lorraine Hansberry House at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue possesses exceptional historic and cultural significance. Lorraine Hansberry’s groundbreaking play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, was the first drama by an African American woman to be produced on Broadway. It grappled with themes of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement and drew directly from Hansberry’s own childhood experiences in Chicago.

*A Raisin in the Sun* closely echoes the trauma that Hansberry’s own family endured after her father, Carl Hansberry, purchased a brick apartment building at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue that was subject to a racially-discriminatory housing covenant. A three-year-long-legal battle over the property, challenging the enforceability of restrictive covenants that effectively sanctioned discrimination in Chicago’s segregated neighborhoods, culminated in 1940 with a United States Supreme Court decision and was a locally important victory in the effort to outlaw racially-discriminatory covenants in housing.

Hansberry’s pioneering dramas forced the American stage to a new level of excellence and honesty. Her strident commitment to gaining justice for people of African descent, shaped by her family’s direct efforts to combat institutional racism and segregation, marked the final phase of the vibrant literary movement known as the Chicago Black Renaissance. Born of diverse creative and intellectual forces in Chicago’s African-American community from the 1930s through the 1950s, the Chicago Black Renaissance also yielded such acclaimed writers as Richard Wright (1908-1960) and Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), as well as pioneering cultural institutions like the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library. (The homes of Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks, and the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library were recommended for designation as Chicago Landmarks by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in November 2009.)

Lorraine Hansberry's groundbreaking play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, (right) echoes the trauma that Hansberry's family faced after her father, Carl Hansberry, purchased the brick apartment building at 6140 S. Rhodes Av. (below) that was subject to a racially-discriminatory housing covenant.



## THE CHICAGO BLACK RENAISSANCE LITERARY MOVEMENT

The Chicago Black Renaissance is the name given to the surge of artistic expression, community organizing, and social activity in Chicago's African-American community during the 1930s through the 1950s, and which figured prominently in the years leading to the modern Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Through the tumultuous years of the Depression, World War II, and a second "Great Migration" of African-Americans to an almost completely segregated Chicago of the 1940s and 1950s, this multi-disciplinary collaboration of artists, writers, scholars, and activists promoted the study of black history, art and politics to inform social protest against racism and discrimination. During this dynamic era Chicago was one of, if not *the* center, of urban African-American art, blues and jazz, dance, theater, poetry and fiction, and sociological study.

The Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement emerged from broad social and cultural changes that accompanied the unprecedented expansion of the African-American community on Chicago's South Side, beginning with the Great Migration of 1916-1918 and continuing with successive migrations throughout the 1950s that brought blacks from the Deep South to the urban North. The inception of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement coincides with the onset of the Great Depression of 1929 and the resulting collapse of the "Black Metropolis," the center of the city's African-American political, social, economic, and cultural life that developed in the 1910s around 35<sup>th</sup> and State Streets. Many blacks migrating to Chicago found that the North could be as hostile as the South, especially when it came to issues such as membership in trade unions, access to employment, and lending, insurance and housing restrictions that confined the black population to portions of the West Side and to the "Black Belt," the overcrowded chain of neighborhoods on the city's South Side. Their response was one of demonstrated urgency to improve conditions for their own and future generations.

By the 1930s, the Black Belt, euphemistically renamed the "Black Metropolis" existed as a narrow 40-block-long corridor running along both sides of State Street on Chicago's South Side. African-American residential settlement was predominately confined to this enclave which was almost completely segregated. Its oldest northernmost section which encompassed the once-thriving Black Metropolis was characterized by extreme overcrowding, dilapidated tenements, high rents, and cramped "kitchenette" apartments. African-Americans fortunate enough to purchase homes often settled in the southern portions of the Black Belt or nearer the lake as they found their choices limited by discriminatory practices including housing covenants, redlining tactics, and violent protests in nearby white neighborhoods. Wide-spread unemployment, inadequate housing options, poverty, crime, and over-crowded conditions contributed to a palpable sense of frustration with the denial of citizenship rights throughout the African-American community in Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s.

Despite the gravity of these problems, African-Americans promoted solidarity within their community and its institutions. Bronzeville, one of the largest black communities in the United States, became the center of African-American culture in Chicago. Its important institutions sought to uplift the community during the time by encouraging intellectual discourse and artistic expression celebrating African-American culture and a pan-African identity that sought to unify people of African descent throughout the world.

The struggle to succeed in the face of discrimination, the tension between hope and frustration, and the outrage over the escalating violence in the South are themes that anchor the novels, poems, and plays of such acclaimed Chicago Black Renaissance writers as Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lorraine Hansberry (who, respectively, can be said to represent the beginning, middle, and final phases of the

Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement). Through their works, the writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement gave a voice to the injustices that would culminate in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

For example, in 1959, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* grappled with many of the themes of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement and drew directly from Hansberry's own childhood experiences in Chicago. The struggle of Hansberry's characters to secure decent housing in the face of blatant discrimination closely echoes the trauma that Hansberry's own family endured as part of a legal battle that ensued after her father, Carl Hansberry, purchased a brick apartment building at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue. In 1940, the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Hansberry v. Lee* was seen as an important victory in the effort to outlaw racially-discriminatory covenants in housing.

## **MAJOR FORCES IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY SHAPING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHICAGO BLACK RENAISSANCE**

The creative outpouring of art, literature and theater of the Chicago Black Renaissance was fueled by dissatisfaction with economic, social and political conditions in Chicago's African-American community that evolved nearly a half century earlier. The Reconstruction period after the Civil War lasted until 1877 and saw a steadily increasing number of rural blacks from the South relocating to Chicago. Throughout the 1880s, African-American settlement in Chicago was largely confined to the city's South Side between 16<sup>th</sup> Street to 24<sup>th</sup> Street, concentrated in several blocks west of State Street. Despite a series of state laws in the 1870s and 1880s, including an 1885 law against discrimination in public places, instances of segregation remained widespread. More important, laws were rarely enforced and did nothing to address blatant employment discrimination and restrictive housing practices.

By 1890, the African-American population in Chicago had risen to nearly 15,000—more than double the 1880 total of approximately 6,500. Dwarfed by a burgeoning European immigrant population, blacks accounted for just over 1 percent of the city's total population that exceeded one million people. During this time, the major area of residential settlement and commercial development the Black Belt stretched from 24<sup>th</sup> Street to 35<sup>th</sup> Street between Federal and State Streets in the Douglas community area. The narrow strip of land was bordered on the west by rail yards and industrial properties and on the east by affluent white residential neighborhoods.

During this time, new civic leaders emerged from within the African-American community to confront racial inequalities in Chicago and beyond. Some of the most prominent and vocal leaders were attorney Edward H. Morris, Dr. Charles Edwin Bentley, S. Laing Williams and Fannie Barrier Williams, along with Ferdinand L. Barnett. Barnett who established Chicago's first black newspaper, the *Conservator*, in 1878, and his wife, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a journalist and activist who spearheaded campaigns to protest lynchings in the South, advocated for the women's suffrage and settlement house movements and played a key role in establishing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. The Ida B. Wells-Barnett House at 3624 S. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, a direct physical link to Wells' life in Chicago, was designated a Chicago Landmark in 1995. Wells' outspoken criticism of racially motivated brutality stirred the nation and encouraged a strong spirit of social activism and women's organizing within the African-American community.



# BRING MORE OUT SOUTH TO WORK

Hundreds of our men and women are arriving in Chicago and other Northern cities each week. It is a good sign. It shows that at last the members of our race who have been living in the shadow of death by the lynchers and under the baneful influences of the Jim Crow laws and other humiliating conditions which make the Southland a good place to steer clear of, are waking up. It shows further that the wonderful Southern conditions, the public school



The unprecedented population growth of the African-American community on Chicago's South Side began with the Great Migration of 1916-1918. Top left: Economic and social opportunities in Chicago prompted many families to relocate to the city from the Deep South. Top right: The *Chicago Defender* was an important voice in encouraging Southern blacks to migrate to Chicago. Left: During World War I, good-paying industrial jobs in factories and steel mills became available to African-Americans. Bottom: By the 1920s, Chicago's thriving "Black Metropolis" gained national recognition as a model of African-American achievement.



Over time the combined influences of oppression faced by African-Americans in the South and economic and social opportunities in the North prompted many to leave their homes and families and move to Chicago. With the advent of World War I, as military production demands rose and industrial workers were drafted into military service, Chicago lost a critical supply of then-predominately white industrial workers during a time of intense need. As a result, African-Americans who were previously excluded from industrial jobs found new opportunities for employment. The *Chicago Defender*, the nation's most influential black weekly newspaper, recognized the significance of this shift and encouraged southern blacks to relocate to Chicago.

Pullman porters, working in railroad cars that criss-crossed the country, also served as agents of change, distributing thousands of copies of the *Defender* with its ideas of freedom and tolerance available in the urban North. With more than two-thirds of its readership base located outside of Chicago, the *Chicago Defender* utilized its influence to wage a campaign to support a "Great Migration" of blacks from the segregated agricultural south to the factories and stockyards of Chicago. It published blazing editorials, articles and cartoons lauding the benefits of the North, posted job listings and train schedules to facilitate relocation, and declared May 15, 1917, as the date of the "Great Northern Drive." The *Chicago Defender's* support of migration contributed significantly to the decision by its Southern readers to migrate to the North in record numbers. Between 1916 and 1918, at least 50,000 people migrated to Chicago, nearly doubling the city's black population.

During the Great Migration of 1916-1918 and successive migrations continuing into the 1950s, tens of thousands of African-Americans from the rural and urban South arrived in Chicago. For many, Chicago held the allure of possibilities—good paying jobs and a more egalitarian society—that stood in sharp contrast to the dearth of opportunity and the pervasive, legalized racism that plagued the predominately agricultural southern states. While some economic opportunities may have been realized in Chicago during this time, however, the promise of full equality was slow in coming.

Continuing in the early 1900s, African-Americans continued to finance and build their own commercial and institutional structures in the area centered at State and 35<sup>th</sup> streets. These undertakings were encouraged by the competitive spirit pervading the city as well as being a reaction to the segregation that discouraged Chicago's African-American community from competing with white-owned companies. A thriving "city-within-a-city" known as the "Black Metropolis" gained nationwide publicity in the early 1920s as a model of African-American achievement. This center of the city's African-American social, economic, and cultural life derived its spirit from the same set of stimuli that other recently arriving groups from Europe tapped into to develop their culturally distinctive enclaves throughout the city. By the late-1920s, the prosperous Black Metropolis commercial district reached the height of its prosperity. (Eight buildings and a public monument considered to be some of the most significant surviving commercial and institutional properties of "Black Metropolis-Bronzeville" were designated as Chicago Landmarks by City Council in 1997.)

The influx of Southern blacks to the already overcrowded South Side prompted those families who could afford to move from the northernmost sections of the community to seek housing south of 35<sup>th</sup> Street, extending the Black Belt to 55<sup>th</sup> Street and east of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive. This area, encompassing portions of the Douglas, Grand Boulevard, and Washington Park communities, collectively assumed the sobriquet of "Bronzeville" by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1920s, the expansion of the Black Metropolis was met with vigorous resistance from white neighborhoods situated in all directions. Racial tension escalated to violence during the Chicago Race Riot of July 1919, when a black youngster drowned at the 27<sup>th</sup> Street beach on the lake, the result of a rock throwing incident. Five days of rioting left



# RIOT SWEEPS CHICAGO

Gun Battles and Fighting in Streets  
Keep the City in an Uproar

4,000 Troops in Armory-Ready  
to Patrol City; Scores Are Killed



Racial tension escalated to violence during the Chicago Race Riot of July 1919. Top: *Chicago Defender* headline from August 2, 1919. Left: Five days of rioting left 38 African-American Chicagoans dead and over 300 wounded. Bottom: Many houses surrounding the stockyards were set ablaze during the rioting.



38 African-American Chicagoans dead and over 300 wounded. After the riot, racial tensions hardened as whites were increasingly determined to exclude blacks from their neighborhoods.

In the then-predominately white Washington Park neighborhood, opposition to African-American settlement took the form of a mass meeting on October 20, 1919. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, nearly 1,200 white protestors unified by the slogan, "They Shall Not Pass," gathered to demonstrate their opposition to African-Americans relocating to the area. Organizations such as the Hyde Park-Kenwood Property Owners' Association were established to reinforce the boundaries of segregation through the promotion of discriminatory housing practices and restrictive covenants that made it nearly impossible for African-Americans to acquire mortgages and insurance. Also at this time, a smaller group known as the Washington Park Court Improvement Association vowed not to sell or rent property to African-Americans.

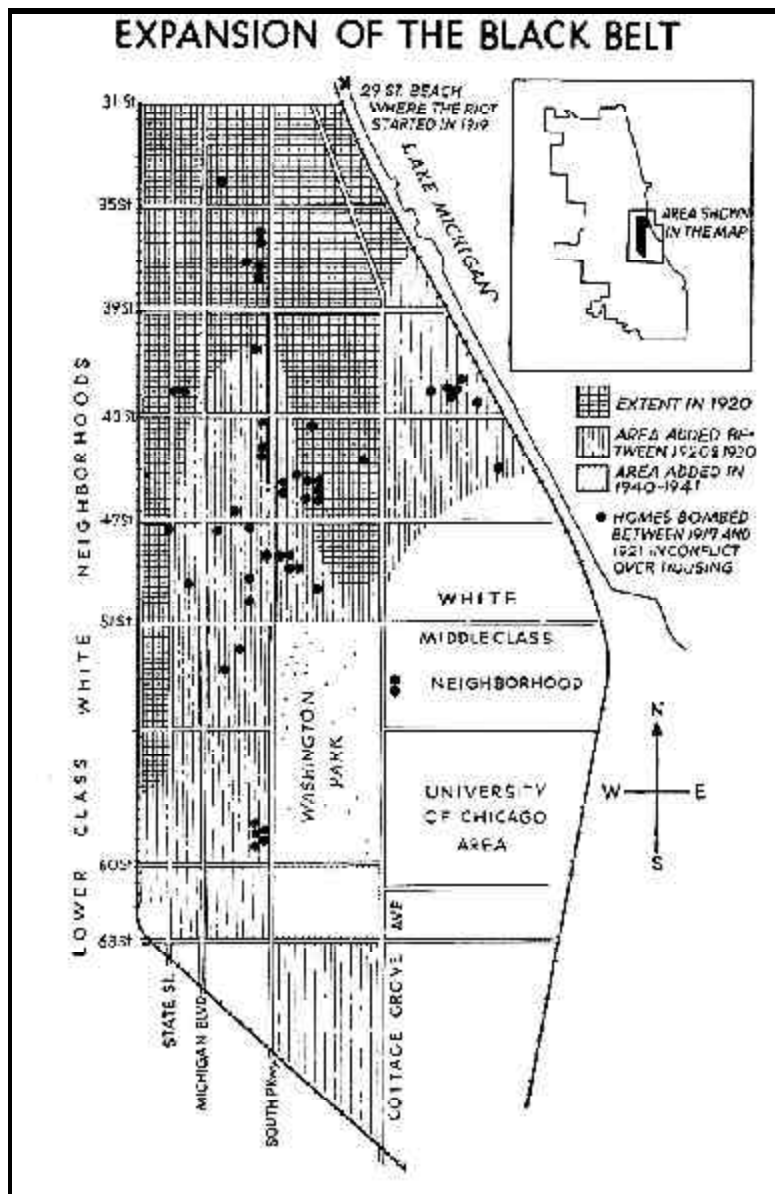
The frequency of violent outbreaks rose throughout the early 1920s as African-American homeowners and realtors who sold or rented property to blacks were targets of a bombing campaign. Jesse Binga, a prominent African-American banker and real estate dealer, was the target of numerous acts of violence. Between March 1919 and November 1920, Binga's home at 5922 S. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive (extant) was bombed ten times. Black homeowners in the 4500 block of Vincennes Avenue and the 4400 block of Grand Boulevard (now Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive) were also victims of unidentified bombers. Undeterred, African-Americans continued to expand the boundaries of the Black Belt by moving further south into the Grand Boulevard and Washington Park neighborhoods during the 1920s. Also between 1925 and 1929, black Chicagoans gained unprecedented access to civil service jobs and won offices in state and local government.

White businessmen, who previously ignored the economic potential of the African-American community, began to develop an alternate business area on 47<sup>th</sup> Street between Indiana and St. Lawrence Avenues that catered to African-Americans. During the Great Depression of 1929, their well-financed chain stores presented insurmountable competition to the independent African-American businesses in the Black Metropolis at 35<sup>th</sup> and State Streets. As a result, most of African-American-owned banks, insurance companies and other businesses in the Black Metropolis were forced to close. Despite targeted boycotts at chain stores that would serve, but would not hire, African-Americans, the commercial center catering to the African-American community shifted to this area centering on the intersection of Grand Boulevard and 47<sup>th</sup> Street.

In 1929, distinguished Jewish philanthropist and Chairman of Sears, Roebuck and Company, Julius Rosenwald (1862-1932) provided nearly \$3 million to develop the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments, a pioneering private housing complex located at 4618 S. Michigan Avenue. With construction of the apartments, Rosenwald strived to prove that reasonably priced housing for tenants with relatively low incomes could be developed while still achieving a fair return on investment. Unfortunately, the opening of the building in 1929 corresponded with the onset of the Great Depression, and only minimal financial returns were realized. The project however, became a model for future public housing projects.

Rosenwald funded other important initiatives in the Bronzeville community including donating the property for the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library at 4801 S. Michigan Avenue. Of all his philanthropic efforts, Rosenwald was most famous for the more than 5,000 "Rosenwald Schools" he established throughout the South in rural black communities, and the 4,000 libraries he added to existing schools. In 1927, Rosenwald received a special gold medal from the William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement in Race Relations for his contributions to the education of African-American youth.





Housing restrictions confined blacks to the “Black Belt,” an overcrowded chain of almost exclusively African-American neighborhoods on the city’s South Side. Left: A map from the groundbreaking sociological study, *Black Metropolis*, by Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake, documents the expansion of the Black Belt.

The oldest, northernmost section which encompassed the once-thriving Black Metropolis was characterized by extreme overcrowding and high rents. Below: A cramped “kitchenette” apartment. Bottom: A view of dilapidated tenements on South Dearborn Street in the 1930s.



By the early 1930s, the majority of Chicago's African-American population resided in the Grand Boulevard and Washington Park neighborhoods of Bronzeville. The subdivision of apartments into kitchenettes contributed to the overcrowding of the area, and these substandard apartments diminished the quality of neighborhood life by turning the western part of the neighborhood along Federal and Dearborn streets into a district of rooming houses. The eastern section of the Grand Boulevard neighborhood and the apartments around Washington Park, however, remained home to solidly middle-class African-Americans.

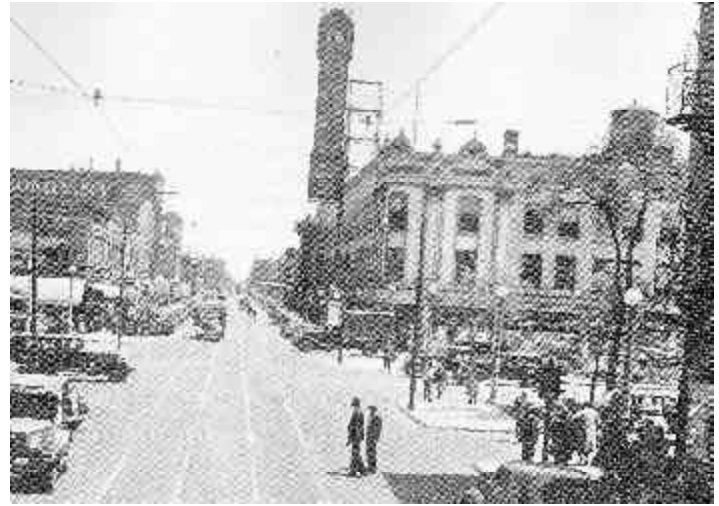
The momentum of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement was encouraged in 1940 with the opening of the American Negro Exposition in Chicago. Held at the Chicago Coliseum (demolished in 1982, located on southwest corner of 14<sup>th</sup> Street and S. Wabash Avenue) from July 4 through September 2, 1940, the American Negro Exposition celebrated and promoted black achievement in cultural, intellectual and commercial endeavors over the seventy-five years from the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865 to 1940. With exhibitions from every state in the United States, from several Caribbean islands, and from the African nation of Liberia, the exposition was described as the first black-organized world's fair. Principally organized by Claude Barnett, the founder of the Associated Negro Press, the event offered evidence of black Chicago's awareness of its pivotal place in American life. One of the more important contributions of the exposition was the compilation of a book entitled, the *Cavalcade of the American Negro*. Produced by the Illinois Writers' Project of the WPA, this sweeping history of black contributions to all phases of American life from 1865 to 1940, was edited by Arna Bontemps and illustrated by Adrian Troy, of the Illinois Writers' and Art Projects, respectively.

In 1944, only 10% of the 337,000 African-Americans living in Chicago resided outside of the Black Belt. Another large-scale wave of African-American migration to Chicago occurred following World War II. The rise in population was not matched by a corresponding increase in housing units in the increasing dilapidated and already densely-populated Bronzeville community. In addition to creating even more overcrowded conditions, the segregated housing market also resulted in inflated rents. African-Americans were forced to pay higher rents for the same amount of space than did other ethnic groups.

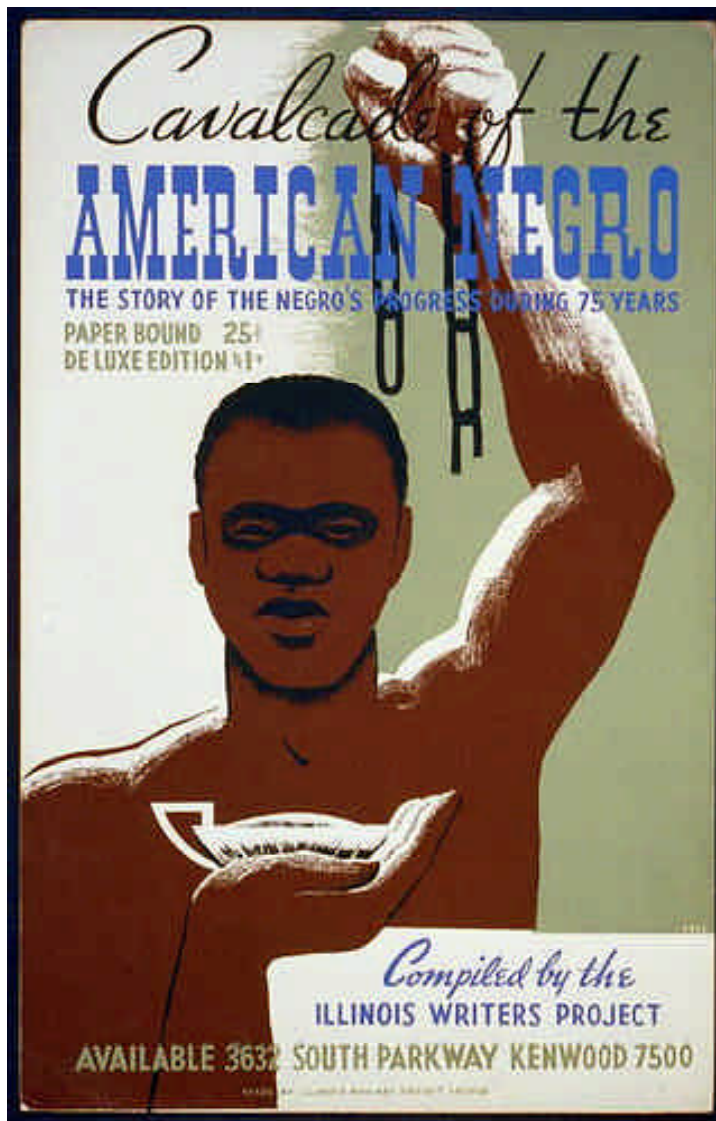
Between 1940 and 1950, the African-American population in Chicago nearly doubled (from approximately 278,000 to nearly 495,000), but the Black Belt remained confined within the same area. Increased employment and housing demands of African-Americans in Chicago resulted in racial conflicts in several South Side neighborhoods. From 1945 to 1954, at least nine major race riots occurred in Chicago, with housing issues cited as the major cause of each conflict. Gwendolyn Brooks expressed her concerns about the housing problem in a political essay entitled, "They Call it Bronzeville."

The lack of housing and the pressure of a growing population led to increases in poverty and crime within Bronzeville, which prompted many middle-class African-American families to move from the area. As predominately white neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side racially changed in the 1940s and 1950s, the housing market for middle-class, African-American homeowners expanded to include such communities as Woodlawn, Chatham, Greater Grand Crossing, and Englewood. The exodus of the middle-class however, had important consequences on the continued economic stability of Bronzeville. Neighborhood businesses struggled as their middle-class customer base rapidly dwindled.

At the same time, plans for the "renewal" of the Bronzeville community were developed. The Chicago Housing Authority opened the Ida B. Wells Housing Project at 37<sup>th</sup> and Vincennes in 1941. Blocks of deteriorated homes in the once-thriving community were classified as tracts of "slum and blighted" property. In the years that followed, entire blocks were razed for the construction of public housing projects, the



After the decline of the Black Metropolis, the commercial center of the African-American community centered on Grand Boulevard and 47th Street. Unlike the Black Metropolis, shops along 47th Street were largely controlled by white businessmen. Left: A view of 47th Street in 1941. Right: 47th Street in 1937 looking east across South Parkway (now, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive ) toward the Regal Theatre (demolished).



The momentum of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement was hastened by the 1940 opening of the American Negro Exposition in Chicago, which celebrated and promoted black achievement in cultural, intellectual, and commercial endeavors. Below: A poster advertising the Expo. Left: A sweeping history of black contributions to American life entitled, *Cavalcade of the American Negro*, was introduced at the Exposition.







Another large-scale wave of African-American migration to Chicago occurred following World War II. The rise in population was not matched by an increase in housing units, resulting in added racial tension. Organizations like the Woodlawn Property Owners Association sought to reinforce the boundaries of segregation through the promotion of discriminatory housing practices, restrictive covenants, and blatant racism (top left). Top right: Fear of "trouble" as a result of blacks moving into this South Side community brought police to the neighborhood.

Right: Wide-spread unemployment, inadequate housing options, poverty, crime and over-crowded conditions contributed to a sense of anger and frustration with the denial of basic citizenship rights throughout the African-American community in Chicago in the pre-Civil Rights era.



campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology, and the Dan Ryan Expressway. More public housing developments would follow, and over time these placed added pressure on neighborhood schools and further reinforced the segregated housing pattern on the City's South Side. Wide-spread unemployment, inadequate housing options, poverty, crime, and over-crowded conditions contributed to a palpable sense of anger and frustration with the denial of citizenship rights throughout the African-American community in Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s.

In 1954, five years before the Broadway opening of Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, the United States Supreme Court had declared in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that racial segregation in public schools was illegal. This decision marked the climax of decades of legal challenges and initiated a new level of resistance to racism and discrimination. The resistance crystalized in 1955 with the brutal murder of Emmet Till and the refusal of Rosa Parks to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus to a white passenger. (Robert Temple Church of God in Christ at 4021 S. State Street, the location of Till's funeral and three-day visitation, was designated a Chicago Landmark in 2006.) In response to the arrest of Rosa Parks, the Montgomery bus boycott was staged. Lasting for more than one year, the boycott led to the desegregation of buses in 1956 and marked the beginning of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership rise in the Civil Rights Movement. Boycotts and sit-ins intensified as federal troops were called into Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 to prevent interference with school integration. After these catalytic events, the Civil Rights Movement shifted to a strategy of "direct action"—primarily boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, marches and similar actions that relied on mass mobilization, nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. This mass-action strategy typified the Civil Rights movement from 1960 to 1968.

## **LORRAINE HANSBERRY (1930-1965) AND THE CHICAGO BLACK RENAISSANCE LITERARY MOVEMENT**

Segregation and discrimination confining blacks to inferior schools, substandard housing and limited employment opportunities, conflicts between the races, and outrage over the escalating violence in the South are themes that anchor the great American novels, poems, and plays of such acclaimed Chicago Black Renaissance writers as Lorraine Hansberry, Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks. Counterbalancing these external societal constraints, these writers presented blacks as a people with hope and resilience in the face of adversity. Accordingly, through their efforts, the writers of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement gave a voice to many of the injustices and inequities that would eventually culminate in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

During this era, pioneering playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry also found a stage for dramas that grappled with the themes of the Chicago Black Renaissance. In the 1950s, Lorraine Hansberry looked back on her Chicago childhood and in the groundbreaking play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, interpreted African-American family politics in the idiom of the American family plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. The setting of her play is the confining ghetto kitchenette apartment environment of which Gwendolyn Brooks also wrote. Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" provides the title for the play: "What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun? ... *Or does it explode?*"

Some literary critics contend that Lorraine Hansberry's status as a Chicago writer working in New York and writing for a wide audience make *A Raisin in the Sun* peripheral to the Chicago Black Renaissance. Others maintain that the playwright's treatment of African-American family life, the stresses of economic

deprivation, her family's personal struggle for housing outside of the South Side ghetto, and the conflict of the generations resonates throughout the literature of the final years of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement. Her writings reflected her fight for civil rights and her views against racism and discrimination.

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was born May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois, the youngest (by seven years) of four children. Her father, Carl Augustus Hansberry, was a successful real estate broker, United States Marshal, and member of the activist Chicago branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League. Her mother, Nannie Perry Hansberry, was a schoolteacher who entered politics and became a Republican ward committeewoman. Hansberry's parents were prominent activists committed to political and social reform in Chicago. The Hansberry's home was a unique social and intellectual atmosphere, where the family often entertained luminaries including Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, Jesse Owens and W.E. B. DuBois.

Hansberry was a self-described "rebel" whose willingness to engage in social protest was born of the early battles that she witnessed when her family moved to a white neighborhood. In 1937 when Hansberry was just seven years old, her parents purchased a small apartment building at **6140 S. Rhodes Avenue** in the Washington Park subdivision. Because the property was subject to a racially restrictive real estate covenant, it was purchased by the Hansberrys through their attorney, Jay B. Crook. Covenants like this emerged in response to the influx of African-Americans to Chicago between World War I and World War II, when many white property owners became increasingly agitated by what they saw as an invasion of black residents. As a result, many white property owners joined organizations like the Woodlawn Property Owners' Association and signed covenants that barred them from renting or selling their properties to African-Americans.

"Three-flat" apartment buildings like the one purchased by the Hansberrys at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue began to be developed in more densely populated urban neighborhoods beginning in the 1890s. Built in 1909, the small apartment building at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue was typical of Chicago "three-flats," with three apartments arranged around a common central entrance and stair hall. This three-story dark brown brick building is accented with stone trim and features simplified Classical-style details. A projecting bay and front porch distinguish the building's front façade.

The Hansberrys moved into the building at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue in May 1937. On June 3, 1937, Anna Lee, a property owner in the neighborhood and member of the Woodlawn Property Owners Association, filed suit for an injunction against the Hansberrys, claiming that their occupancy of the property violated a restrictive covenant attached to it. Lee also sought to restrain the Hansberry's from renting apartments in the building to black tenants. On July 3, 1937, a temporary injunction was issued by Judge Michael Fineberg that granted all of the reliefs that Anna Lee was seeking and upheld the legality of the covenants, thus effectively sanctioning discrimination in Chicago's segregated neighborhoods. In his ruling Judge Fineberg stated, "I don't go where I am not wanted," and further ruled that the Hansberrys had no interest in the property despite the fact that Carl Hansberry held the title to the property.

Despite threats, protests, and violent attacks, Carl Hansberry with the assistance of the Chicago branch of the NAACP appealed the judge's decision. The family continued to reside in the building while the injunction was appealed. In October 1937, the Appellate court upheld Judge Fineberg's ruling and the injunction was allowed to stand. Under threats of being evicted from the property, the Hansberry family vacated their home in June 1938. The case came to trial on April 15, 1938, in the Circuit Court of Cook





# YOUNG WOMAN FROM CHICAGO DOES HIT PLAY



## New York Critics Laud 'A Raisin in the Sun'

(Chicago Tribune Press Reader)  
NEW YORK, March 11—Critical praise was heaped Wednesday night on Chicago Playwright Lorraine Hansberry and her play about a southside Chicago Negro family which had its premiere before an enthusiastic audience in the Ethel Barrymore theater.

As for Miss Hansberry, she made history with the occasion as the first Negro woman author to see her work produced on Broadway. She also won what one critic called a tremendous personal



Lorraine Hansberry

McNeil, who, despite poverty, has kept her ideals and her code.

Diana Sands plays the intellectual daughter who wants to be a doctor; Ruby Dee the problem-ridden young wife. The action involves the family's decision to move from its southside slum apartment into a house in a white neighborhood.

John Chapman of the Daily News found it "a beautiful, lovable play . . . affectionately human, funny and touching, and it is acted by a company of actors who really are a company and not just a set of players. It is a work of theatrical magic in which the usual barrier between audience and stage disappears;

Lorraine Hansberry's groundbreaking play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, was the first drama by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway. Top left: Hansberry drew inspiration for the play from her own childhood experiences in Chicago. Bottom: The play echoes the trauma that her family endured after her father, Carl Hansberry, purchased a brick apartment building at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue. Top right and center: The pioneering play was met with tremendous critical acclaim.

County, before Judge Bristol. While the trial lasted only 10 days, the judge reserved his ruling until late in the summer of 1938 when he announced his decision in favor of Anna Lee.

The case progressed through the legal system, and in December 1939 the Illinois Supreme Court affirmed the decision of the Circuit Court in a 7 to 5 ruling. Early in 1940, petitions were filed with the United States Supreme Court and several months later the Supreme Court, granted Hansberry's petition to review the case. On October 24 and 25, 1940, the case was argued before the Supreme Court. Earl B. Dickerson (1891-1986), a successful attorney, entrepreneur, businessman, president of the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company, and later Alderman of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ward, represented Carl Hansberry. Dubbed "the Dean of Chicago's Black lawyers," Dickerson was the first black graduate from the University of Chicago Law School.

On November 12, 1940, the United States Supreme Court handed down its decision in favor of Hansberry and unanimously ruled to reverse the decision of the lower courts. Although the constitutionality of restrictive covenants was not acted upon at that time, the ruling of the Supreme Court declared that this particular covenant was deficient because it failed to secure the necessary supporting signatures in the neighborhood to render it valid. The *Chicago Defender* published the entire text of the *Hansberry v. Lee* decision on November 23, 1940, and the African-American community in Chicago became encouraged that judgments rendered in lower courts which sustained restrictive covenants on the basis of earlier litigation would be nullified.

Despite the favorable ruling, discriminatory real estate practices in Chicago continued much as before, however, from a legal standpoint *Hansberry v. Lee* was seen locally as an important battle in the war to outlaw racial covenants in housing. The Chicago branch of the NAACP meanwhile continued its struggle against all racially restrictive covenants as part of a national effort. (Restrictive covenants would be determined to be unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in 1948 in *Shelley v. Kraemer*.) Carl Hansberry's outrage over continued housing discrimination in Chicago despite the extraordinary financial sacrifices, traumatic physical attacks, and complex litigation that his family endured, prompted him to move to Mexico in 1946.

In protest to segregation, her parents sent Lorraine Hansberry to public schools rather than private ones. She attended Betsy Ross Elementary School, then in 1944 she was enrolled in Englewood High School. Recalling her personal experience, Hansberry's memoirs detailed the "substandard quality" of the educational system that was provided for African-American children in Chicago and the violence that she encountered during race riots while attending the predominately white Englewood High School. She broke the family tradition of enrolling in African-American colleges and enrolled in the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where she majored in painting. She was soon to discover that her talent lay in writing, not art. After two years she decided to leave the University of Wisconsin for New York City.

In New York City, Hansberry's commitment to fighting for the rights of African-American people emerged. From 1950 to 1953, she worked for Paul Robeson's progressive black newspaper, *Freedom*. In a letter to a friend she described the paper as "the journal to Negro liberation." In 1953 she married Robert Nemiroff, a Jewish activist and songwriter. After marriage, she worked as a waitress and cashier, writing in her spare time. In 1956 she devoted all her time to writing *The Crystal Stair*, a play about the struggles and frustrations of the Younger family, a working-class black family in Chicago's South Side during the 1950s. The play was later renamed, *A Raisin in the Sun*.





## PUSH RESIDENTIAL FIGHT



## STRATEGY BOARD IN HANSBERRY RESTRICTIVE COVENANT CASE



## Hansberry Decree Opens 500 New Homes To Race

By KENNETH B. WATERS Jr.  
and JOHN A. DURBIN, Esq.

[illegible]

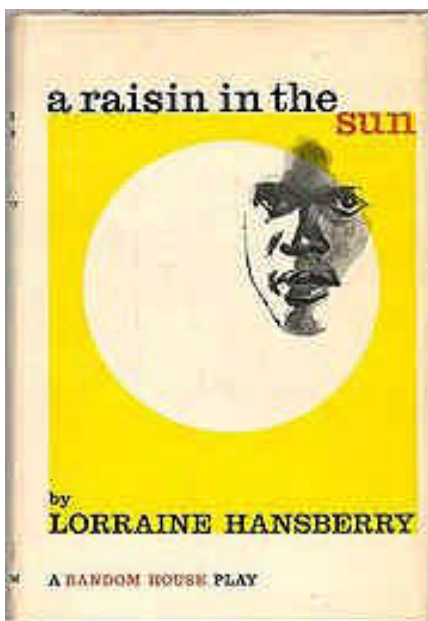
The two hand of instruction, covenants which has effected the outward movement of the Race on this, the South side was placed at one point by the decision handed down by the United States Supreme Court, *Scott vs. Sandford*.

It is an over requirement that a business structure what signed by all persons at the security holders at the time. They declared that only 24 per cent of the owners had signed the agreement.

**Top left: The brick three-flat at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue was the subject of a three-year-long legal battle. Top right: Prominent attorney Earl B. Dickerson (left) and Harry Pace discuss the litigation in 1939. Dickerson represented Carl Hansberry throughout the case.**

The 1940 United States Supreme Court decision in *Hansberry v. Lee* was seen locally as an important victory in the effort to outlaw racially-discriminatory covenants in housing. Additionally, the ruling encouraged the national office of the NAACP to complete a legal crusade that ended in 1948 with a Supreme Court ruling declaring all such covenants unconstitutional. Left: The front page of the *Chicago Defender* from November 23, 1940 reports the Supreme Court decision.

Lorraine Hansberry's pioneering dramas forced the American stage to a new level of excellence and honesty. Right: Hansberry is seen in 1959 following the Broadway opening of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Bottom left: Hansberry also wrote the screenplay for the 1961 film version of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Bottom right: The film starred Ruby Dee (left), Sidney Poitier (right), and Claudia McNeil and was nominated for two Golden Globe awards and a Writers Guild of America Award.





*A Raisin in the Sun* was a revolutionary work for its time. Hansberry created in the Younger family one of the first honest depictions of a black family on an American stage. Before this play, African-American roles, usually small and comedic, largely employed stereotypes. Hansberry, however, showed the entire family in a realistic light, one that was neither sentimentalized nor stereotyped and far from comedic. Throughout the play she broached important issues and conflicts, such as poverty, discrimination, and the construction of African-American racial identity.

*A Raisin in the Sun* explored not only the tension between white and black society but also the strain within the black community over how to react to an oppressive white community. The spirit and the struggles of the Younger family symbolized the social progress and setbacks characteristic of the 1950s. Through her drama, Hansberry attempted to bridge the gap between blacks and whites in the United States and underscore the urgency and necessity of the Civil Rights movement. *A Raisin in the Sun* was brought the exploration of the black experience to American theater. Literary critic Margaret Wilkerson emphasized the importance of Hansberry's pioneering drama in the context of African-American art saying, "because the racial experience was so authentically portrayed, blacks found a new voice and created a vital, provocative theater movement in the next decade."

On March 11, 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York City and immediately elicited praise from both audiences and critics. It was the first play produced on Broadway written by a black woman. In May 1959, she received the prestigious New York Critics' Circle award for best play (she was the youngest American, the first black playwright, and the fifth woman at the time to receive it). Since that time, *Raisin in the Sun* has secured its status as an American theatrical classic and has also won international fame. Hansberry also wrote the screenplay for the 1961 film version of *A Raisin in the Sun*. The film which starred Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, and Claudia McNeil and was nominated for two Golden Globe awards and a Writers Guild of America Award in the category of Best Written American Drama.

In 1963 Lorraine Hansberry became very active in the civil rights movement in the South. Along with Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, and James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry met with the then-United States Attorney General Robert Kennedy to challenge the administration's position on civil rights. In 1964 she wrote the text for *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality*, a graphic pictorial account of the violent and brutal living conditions, including lynchings, for blacks in the South during the early days of the pre-Civil Rights movement. During this time she was diagnosed with cancer and divorced her husband, although they continued their literary collaboration. Her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, opened on Broadway the same year. Lorraine Hansberry died of cancer on January 12, 1965, at the age of 34. *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* closed on Broadway the same day. After her death, her ex-husband Robert Nemiroff adapted and published a collection of her work, correspondence, memoirs, and interviews together in an informal biography entitled, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words*.

The spirit and struggles in Lorraine Hansberry's plays symbolized both the social progress and frustrating setbacks characteristic of the 1950s. By the age of thirty-four, Lorraine Hansberry had established her status as a major playwright of the twentieth century. Critics note that Hansberry's pioneering dramas forced the American stage to a new level of excellence, and her strident commitment to gaining justice for people of African descent heralded the next major African-American literary movement, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.

Lorraine Hansberry chose the theater as her artistic battleground to confront racism and to advocate for social change. Also, through essays, letters, and articles Hansberry expressed her opposition to sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination. [Typical of a time when homosexuality was considered taboo and homosexuals routinely faced discrimination, harassment, and imprisonment, gay men and women often married while living closeted and clandestine lives. Whether Hansberry would have identified as a lesbian as we understand the term today, she was an early supporter of equal rights regardless of sexual orientation, and she did belong to the country's first-ever lesbian political organization and is known to have contributed letters in 1957 to the *Ladder*, an early lesbian publication. Hansberry was inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame in 1999.]

The three-flat apartment building at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue is significant for its associations with Lorraine Hansberry and importantly as the focus of the real-life autobiographical story behind Hansberry's most famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun*—born from the trauma that her family endured as part of a three-year-long legal battle that ensued after her father purchased the building. The United States Supreme Court's resulting 1940 decision in *Hansberry v. Lee* was seen locally as an important victory in the effort to outlaw racially-discriminatory covenants in housing. Besides its local impact, it encouraged the national office of the NAACP to complete a legal crusade that ended the effectiveness of all covenants by 1948.

## CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sect. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, object, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Lorraine Hansberry House at 6140 S. Rhodes be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

### ***Criterion 1: Critical Part of the City's History***

*Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois or the United States.*

- Through its associations with nationally prominent playwright Lorraine Hansberry, the Lorraine Hansberry House is associated with the Chicago Black Renaissance, the literary movement that emerged from the surge of artistic expression, community organizing, and social activity in Chicago's African-American community from the 1930s through the 1950s in the pre-Civil Rights years. Through the tumultuous years of the Depression, World War II, and a second "Great Migration" of African-Americans to an almost completely segregated Chicago, this interconnected effort by artists, writers, scholars, and activists promoted the study of black history, art and politics, to inform social protest against racism and discrimination in the years leading up to the 1960s Civil Rights movement. During this dynamic era, Chicago was a national center of urban African-American art, blues and jazz, dance, theater, poetry and fiction.
- The Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement was born of diverse creative and intellectual forces in Chicago's African-American community, and yielded such acclaimed 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers as Richard Wright (1908-1960), Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), and Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965). These



pioneering writers drew from their personal experiences and observations in Chicago and elsewhere to illuminate the dehumanizing effects of racial prejudice. Their eloquent and powerful novels, poems, and plays vividly depicted the spectrum of racism against African-Americans during the Jim Crow era through the years leading up to the modern Civil Rights movement—ranging from wide-spread segregation and institutionalized discrimination to glaring acts of brutality and violence.

- The three-flat apartment building at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue, purchased in 1937 by Carl Hansberry, the father of playwright Lorraine Hansberry, was the subject of a three-year-long legal battle challenging the enforceability of restrictive covenants that effectively sanctioned discrimination in Chicago's segregated neighborhoods. With the assistance of the Chicago branch of the NAACP and attorney Earl B. Dickerson, Hansberry appealed the case to the United States Supreme Court. The 1940 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Hansberry v. Lee* represented an important battle to outlaw racially discriminatory housing covenants. The experience would provide the basis for Lorraine Hansberry's acclaimed play, *A Raisin in the Sun*.

### ***Criterion 3: Significant Person***

*Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

- Lorraine Hansberry's groundbreaking play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, was the first drama by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway. It grappled with themes of the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement and drew directly from Hansberry's own childhood experiences in Chicago. The play closely echoes the trauma that Hansberry's own family endured after her father, Carl Hansberry, purchased a brick apartment building at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue that was subject to a discriminatory housing covenant. A legal battle over the property culminated in 1940 with a United States Supreme Court decision and was a locally important victory in the effort to outlaw racially-discriminatory covenants in housing. Hansberry's pioneering dramas forced the American stage to a new level of excellence and honesty. Her strident commitment to gaining justice for people of African descent, shaped by her family's direct efforts to combat institutional racism and segregation, heralded the next major African-American literary movement, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.

### ***Criterion 6: Distinctive Theme***

*Its representation of an architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other theme expressed through distinctive areas, districts, places, buildings, structures, works of art, or other objects that may or may not be contiguous.*

- For its associations with the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement and the iconic 20<sup>th</sup>-century playwright Lorraine Hansberry who emerged as part of the movement, the Lorraine Hansberry House possesses exceptional historic and cultural significance.
- The Lorraine Hansberry House demonstrates and commemorates the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement, the interconnected effort by artists, writers, scholars, and activists to promote the study of black history, art and politics, to inform social protest against racism and discrimination in the years leading to the modern Civil Rights era. During this dynamic era, Chicago was a national center of urban African-American art, blues and jazz, dance, theater, poetry and fiction.

## ***Integrity Criteria***

*The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architecture or aesthetic value.*

Exterior changes to the Hansberry House include the replacement of the front door and front stairs. Some of the basement windows have been infilled and replaced. Overall, the Hansberry House retains the majority of its historic details and historic building materials.

## **SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES**

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the “significant historical and architectural features” of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based upon its evaluation of the Lorraine Hansberry House at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue the Commission recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building.

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**The Lorraine Hansberry House is located at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue.**

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Patricia A. Scudiero, Commissioner

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### Project Staff

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Susan Perry, research and writing

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### Illustrations

Department of Zoning and Land Use Planning, Historic Preservation Division: pp. 2 (top left and bottom right), 15 (bottom), 17 (top left) and 24.

From Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*: pp. 2 (top right) and 18 (bottom left).

*Chicago Defender*: pp. 5 (top right), 7 (top), 15 (top right) and 17 (top right and bottom).

From Spear, *Black Chicago*: p. 5 (top left).

From Mahoney, *Images of America: Douglas/Grand Boulevard*: pp. 5 (center) and 11 (top left and bottom right).

From Pacyga and Skerret, *Chicago City of Neighborhoods*: pp. 7 (bottom) and 11 (top right).

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From Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*: p. 9 (top left).

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From Drell, *Chicago Sun-Times: 20th Century Chicago*: p. 12 (top right).

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From Harris, *The Homefront, American During World War II*: p. 12 (bottom).

From [www.syracuse.com](http://www.syracuse.com): p. 18 (top right).

From [www.bet.com](http://www.bet.com): p. 18 (right center).